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THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE SOVIET ARMED FORCES

BY

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Department of the Army

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THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE SOVIET ARMED FORCES
AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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ABSTRACT

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Most Sovietologists agree that the Soviet Union is in a state of confusion and transition. Today's predictions will most certainly change tomorrow. Differences in philosophy exist in viewing the role of women in Soviet society, and more specifically, the role of women in the Soviet military. There are those who believe that the role of women was a planned, ideologically based decision. However, there are others who believe that the role of women in the Soviet Union and the Soviet military is totally a practical matter, directed by the exigencies of Soviet history.

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INTRODUCTION

Most Sovietologists agree that the Soviet Union is in a state of confusion and transition. Today's predictions will most certainly change tomorrow. Long-range strategy is not in the forefront of Soviet thinking; rather, the Soviet Union is reacting to events, and taking necessary actions to accommodate these constantly changing circumstances. Others believe that the Soviet Union does nothing without a purpose, and that all actions are part of a grand scheme the Soviets have to become a superpower. These differences in philosophy also exist in viewing the role of women in Soviet society, and more specifically, the role of women in the Soviet military. There are those who believe that the role of women was a planned, ideologically based decision. However, there are others who believe that the role of women in the Soviet Union and the Soviet military is totally a practical matter, directed by the exigencies of Soviet history.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of women in the Soviet armed forces, and to project this role into the future. This will be accomplished by first looking at women in the Soviet military from a historical perspective, followed by their role in Soviet society. These areas, coupled with the current involvement of women in the Soviet military, will provide the foundation from

which to project the future role of women in the Soviet armed forces.

As in most situations, one must be careful not to reach an American conclusion when researching a Soviet topic. At first glance, this topic seems like an easy area to research. We have heard about the significant role, to include serving in combat, that Soviet women played in World War II, the Great Patriotic War. This could mean that Soviet women are accepted and have a significant place in the military. Also, in theory Soviet women obtained equality long before women in the United States. The Bolsheviks in 1917 proclaimed full emancipation for Soviet women. Today, women are 53 percent of the population; an estimated 92 percent of the women work for wages; a majority of the engineers and medical doctors in the Soviet Union are women; and abortion is legal and prevalent. Based upon these statistics, one might quickly conclude that women are truly equal, and play a significant and critical role in Soviet society. In fact, some indicate that women have too much equality, and there should be a men's liberation movement.

However, when these conditions are viewed from the point of Soviet culture, the conclusions are different. Women fought in World War II out of necessity, and they currently play only a minor role in the military. Soviet women obtained "equality" on

paper because the Soviets needed a labor force. The motivation for equality was not altruistic or because there was a belief that women should be equal. Instead, it was a very practical and pragmatic imperative. Being a medical doctor in the Soviet Union does not have the same meaning, pay or prestige as a doctor in the United States. Medicine is considered a woman's job since it is viewed as nurturing, taking care of people. The pay is low, and women are expected to perform this work despite the low salary because it is their duty. Furthermore, despite the high percentage of women physicians, women do not hold the administrative, specialized or managerial positions in the medical field. When examined in depth, women are so overburdened with work and domestic duties that they have little desire or time to have children. This, coupled with the lack of artificial birth control devices, has resulted in the Soviet Union having the highest abortion rate in the world. One Sovietologist went so far as to state that the status of women is abysmal and they are treated like cattle or dogs.

Thus, it appears that women in the Soviet Union are not as equal as the Soviets would have us think, and women in the Soviet armed forces have a much smaller role than is generally thought.

HISTORY OF WOMEN IN THE SOVIET ARMED FORCES

The role of women in the Soviet armed forces is like a pendulum, swinging upward during wartime and swinging back during peacetime. This is also how the role of women in the Soviet military is presented by various writers. For example, a 1976 article on Soviet women in uniform in a US Air Force magazine stated that "no almanac on the Soviet military profession in the USSR would be complete without mentioning women, long an important part of the Soviet Armed Forces."¹ On the other hand, in a 1988 book about the Soviet military system in peace and war, the author states that women play a much smaller role in peacetime than is normally thought. The author also indicates that the role of women during war is given more publicity than their actual involvement.²

The Soviet Union has a history of wars and revolutions. The hearts, souls, and bodies of Soviet women have been shaped in this caldron of war, revolution, death and destruction. During the nineteenth century, women's participation in battle was minimal. They had no real role in war until 1914, after which they had a variety of roles in three separate historical events. In World War I, women entered the armed services individually as volunteer soldiers and fought in combat. After the communist revolution of October 25, 1917, women fought against counterrevolutionaries in

the civil war (1918-1920).³ Their use was primarily limited to the traditional roles in nursing and communications. In 1918 a decree was issued to establish universal military service; the obligation to serve was to men only. However, women did have the right to enter the military on a voluntary basis. At the end of the civil war, there was an estimated 66,000 women serving in the Red Army. They represented two percent of all military personnel.⁴

During World War I women performed support roles and fought in combat, serving in a variety of positions such as riflepersons, armored train commanders, gunners, and demolition troops. Most women were integrated into the regular force. However, some did serve in all-female units--the most unusual being the use of women to shame men. All-female fighting units, known as battalions of death, were formed to shame deserting men.⁵

Female participation in the military was minimal during the period between the world wars. The massive industrialization and urbanization during this period saw women thrust in large numbers into industry and technical training. Thus, when World War II began, there was tremendous industrial talent among the Soviet women.

The role of Soviet women in World War II has not been well publicized despite the fact that they made significant contributions. During the initial phase of the German invasion, the government continued the normal separation between men and women: men to the front and women to the rear. It is estimated that there was only a small number of women in military service when the war started. In 1941, there were a few more volunteers, but they were usually assigned to support roles. By the following year losses were so great that mobilization was effected, and eventually all childless women not already engaged in war work were eligible to be called up. By 1943, women had entered all the services and were serving in all the positions that they would occupy until the war ended: infantry, antiaircraft defense, armor, artillery, transportation, communications, air, nursing, and partisan warfare.⁶

The peak strength of women serving in the Soviet armed forces during World War II is estimated at 800,000 to 1,000,000, or 8% of the total number of military personnel.⁷ Women served in many support roles. However, the nature of Soviet fighting is for support functions to be at the front with their combat troops. Therefore, women worked directly at the front where the fighting occurred. Women were also used extensively in combat. Most noteworthy was their combat aviation regiments, the most famous of which was the 588th Night Bomber Regiment.

Shortly after the war a decree was issued demobilizing all women in the ranks except for those specialists who wanted to stay in the service at their wartime posts. Thus, the Soviet Union was now in a peacetime situation and there no longer was a need for the large scale participation of women in this new era. The pendulum has once again turned back during this peacetime period. However, in the early 1960s when the number of young males was insufficient to meet personnel requirements, the Soviets increased their recruitment of women in certain specialties, to include electronics technicians, telephone and radio operators, medical and supply personnel, clerks, and cooks⁸ Similarly, in the 1980s the Soviet military appeared to respond to the demographic downturn of reduced births by another accelerated recruitment of women.⁹ Despite these small increases in females, the Soviet Union has not seen the rapid increase in women in the peacetime military that occurred in the United States military during the 1970s. The peacetime role of women in the Soviet Union armed forces remained quite limited.

The services have given some recognition to women for their active, nontraditional role in the armed forces during wartime. From 1918 through 1969, for heroic work, combat feats, and bravery displayed in defending the Soviet Union, 1,401,380 Soviet women have been awarded decorations. Ninety-one women received the

highest medal, the Hero of the Soviet Union award for their role in World War II.¹⁰ However, it should be noted that over half of these awards were delivered posthumously and most given only once to each woman. The majority of the men who received the award were alive and often were second or third time recipients.¹¹ Furthermore, the tendency was to recognize women in groups for their wartime accomplishments while men were recognized individually. There was not much acknowledgement of the role of women in World War II.

Before leaving this section on the history of women in the Soviet armed forces, it is important to discuss why women were called into the military and why women volunteered. The Soviets used women out of necessity. This was evident during World War II. Initially, very few women were involved in the military and the war. However, as the manpower situation worsened, the Soviets were basically forced into using women. Fortunately, they had a base of technical skilled women available due to their role in the work force and their training. Women also were accustomed to doing hard, menial labor. The Soviets, even if they had wanted to, did not have time to evaluate whether society was ready for women in combat. The decision was not based on emotion or ideology; it was a practical, pragmatic imperative.

The answer to the second question as to why the Soviet women volunteered to fight is the same as to why they were called up--necessity. Shelley Saywell, in her book, Women in War, interviewed thirty Soviet women who fought in World War II. The women simply stated that they fought out of necessity. These women added that women do not belong in combat. They felt it was physically too difficult and that only in a national emergency should women fight again.¹²

Despite the fact that they said they volunteered out of necessity, it is important to note that they did have a choice--and, they elected to volunteer. Some said that they enlisted out of revenge as their brothers, fathers, and boyfriends were killed. Others said that they did not want to miss what was going on; while some really did not know what they were really volunteering for.¹³ Some women, even after severe wounds, volunteered again for combat duty. When they were asked why, they said it was not a matter of bravery but of necessity.¹⁴

This answer is in consonance with the Russian definition of bravery. The Russian word for bravery is masculine in gender; therefore, it would be difficult to associate bravery with women. In an article about women fighter pilots during World War II, the author states that "their ardent desire to liberate the Homeland from the nazi invaders, to bring back happiness and peace helped

them in their difficult and complicated 'non-womanly' job."¹⁵ Another woman who protected Stalingrad in her 20s said, "We young women were forced to the horrible task of taking life. It was against our very nature, we who are the giver of life."¹⁶ A Soviet bomber pilot recounted the war by stating that she did not think you should equate killing with cruelty. She thought the risks taken and the sacrifices made for each other made them kinder rather than cruel.¹⁷

Granted, the Soviet Union is one of the first contemporary societies to employ women extensively in its armed forces. We have seen this historical image of the strong, heroic, highly motivated, well disciplined female soldier fighting in defense of the Motherland.¹⁸ The image, however, may be partly propaganda, and not necessarily reflect reality. The role may be more romanticized, more of a fantasy.

The reality of the situation can be seen in what happened after the war. Shelley Saywell relays a story about a young woman who volunteered to be a member of a firing squad to execute deserters. The men in her unit would not talk to her and she was told that the war had made her cruel. After the war and while under psychiatric treatment, the young woman was told to get married and have lots of children to restore her soul.¹⁹ In another interview, a female pilot was asked if she missed the

flying or was ever bored. The pilot replied that "peace was the only thing that they cared about and that not one girl in her regiment chose to remain in the forces. They just wanted to return to normal life."²⁰

History has seen the pendulum swing back and forth, and back and forth. Soviet women have shown that they are loyal defenders of their homeland, and will fight and die for the Motherland. In wartime, the Soviets similarly have shown that they will use women in the military, and use them in combat roles. Despite the significant contribution of Soviet women in war, their military role in peacetime remains minimal. However, the Soviets have learned from World War II that training women as a potential reserve force to provide backup for men if needed can be of value.²¹ Thus, the Soviet armed forces in peacetime is for all practical purposes a male dominated force, regardless of the contributions of women during wartime.

WOMEN IN THE SOVIET UNION

An initial review of the literature on the role of women in the Soviet Union, and their current attitudes and thoughts seems confusing and contradictory. Here is a nation which was basically the first to give women equal rights, put them in the labor force and provide them an education. Here is a country where over

seventy percent of the medical doctors are women, and the majority of the engineers are women. This seems to conflict with comments from Soviet Union specialists who state that women are treated like dogs, like cattle; that the biggest waste of resource in the Soviet Union is women.²²

Further research, plus thinking about two comments that my Soviet instructor made concerning the Soviet Union, seem to help clear up this dichotomy. The instructor's comments were: "Things are not as they seem, and nothing is for nothing."²³ This led me to believe that perhaps this equality was really propaganda, and Soviet women did not really have equality in the same manner as we perceive equality in the United States; that is, from both a ideological and practical standpoint.

From a cultural and historical perspective, the role, or perhaps more appropriately the image, of Soviet women is different than American women. Even prior to the revolution, women were used in the peasant society performing agricultural labor. However, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 transformed the female role; women were given equality. There are those who believe that this change was based both upon ideological and pragmatic reasons; that is, that it was founded on the theoretical Marxist-Lenist approach to liberating women from the "yokes of capitalism and the patriarchal system."²⁴ There are others who believe that the

liberation was strictly for practical reasons.²⁵ The Soviets needed a labor force, and women could provide this labor.

Regardless, a legal basis for female equality was established in the 1977 Constitution, and article 35 states "Women and men have equal rights in the USSR."²⁶ The liberation of women stressed three points--putting women into the labor force, turning household work into social labor, and instituting a sharing of labor within the household. In practice, the latter two have not been implemented.²⁷ There is no communal organization to perform household tasks and the attitude of men toward housework has not changed; specifically, they do little, if any, housework.²⁸ However, when a statement was made to a professor of linguistics at Leningrad University that it sounds like there was a change in law but not in attitude, she stated "it would be wrong to say it didn't change minds; it certainly did; women became much more independent."²⁹

Examining Soviet statistics, one could easily conclude that women in the Soviet Union are liberated--are treated equal to men. Over ninety percent of Soviet women of working age are either in the labor force or students. It is not uncommon to see women spreading asphalt on roads, painting walls, working in railyards and engaging in other forms of manual labor.³⁰

Francine du Plessix Gray, in her book Soviet Women: Walking the Tightrope, posits some observations about female workers that causes one to question just how equal women are. She states that despite the fact that women are slightly better educated than their male counterparts, for the past decade the average female worker earned only two thirds of the average male income--a proportion approximating the last prerevolutionary years. Almost half of the Soviet women are employed in unskilled manual labor or low skilled industrial work. For example, they make up 98 percent of the country's janitors and street cleaners, and over two thirds of highway construction crews and of warehouse workers. The story is similar for the professional areas. It is true that 77 percent of the medical doctors are women, but 52 percent of hospital administrators are men. This inequity is more evident with engineers and skilled technical workers, where 70 percent are women with only six percent in leadership roles.³¹ Furthermore, being a doctor in the Soviet Union does not have the same status or remuneration as in the United States. Being a doctor is women's work since it is taking care of people--a nurturing position. The pay is low, but women are expected to work as doctors because it is their duty.³²

The emancipation did bring women into the workforce and also offered educational opportunities that were not available before. However, joining the labor force, since it was not coupled with a

relaxation or sharing of household duties, has caused a double burden on women. They not only have to work long hours at their jobs, but they also must take care of the children and the house. Men help very little with housework in the Soviet Union.³³ In addition, women must stand in line for hours to purchase food and other necessities of life. The Soviet Union does not have available the everyday household appliances that Americans take for granted. In an interview between Sharon Tennison of the United States with a 35-year-old, single mother, professional Soviet woman the following was revealed:

The reality is that the Soviet women does not have equal opportunities. Theoretically she does, but in reality she does not. She is so bogged down in everyday life, chores, which is very hard...Women don't have the time and possibility to develop themselves...³⁴

This overburdening situation among Soviet women has caused some women to want to return to the past when there was more time available to perform domestic chores and have more babies. In fact, even women in highly visible, prominent positions in the Soviet Union have this philosophy. These women do not push for women to be equally represented in social, economic and political positions throughout the country. They believe that emancipation has been fulfilled since women work and are educated. The reason women are not in leadership roles stems from the natural, biological differences. Women in positions of power in the Soviet

Union emphasize the banning of women from harmful and "unfeminine" heavy physical labor.³⁵ This seems to be the trend among many Soviet women today; they want to be more feminine.

Has perestroika and President Gorbachev had an influence on the current role of women in the Soviet Union? Even Gorbachev's views tend to be confusing and contradictory on the surface. In his July 1990 keynote address to the 28th Congress, Gorbachev stated the importance of women in Soviet political life. Gorbachev supported the election of Galina Semenova, former editor of Peasant woman magazine, as a full member of the Polit Bureau. In January 1990 Gorbachev directly altered the Supreme Soviet agenda, which is usually determined by the Supreme Soviet membership. Gorbachev wanted legislation passed improving welfare of women. The Supreme Soviet passed the legislation, allocating three billion rubles to the social program, titled Urgent Measures to Improve the Position of Women, Protect Mothers and Children, and Strengthen the Family.³⁶

In addressing the special all-union party conference held in the summer of 1988, Gorbachev emphasized the need to relook women's issues:

...I want to dwell on another question of state importance. That is the women's question. It has been claimed more than once we have solved this problem once and for all. Indeed, we have proclaimed equality of rights for women and men, ensured equal access to almost all occupations, established identical

pay for equal work, and guaranteed other women's rights. All this is true. But things have worked out in such a way that, along with their undisputed gains, women still have concerns that to this day in many ways inhibit them from making full use of their rights. He asked for a revival of mass women's organization in the form of women's councils organized under the Soviet Women's Committee.³⁷

The Soviet Premier, Nikolai Ryzhkov, reemphasized Gorbachev's view during his remarks delivered on Soviet television in March 1989 for International Women's Day. "For many years we believed in our country that all women's questions had been solved, but a deeper analysis and glasnost have revealed very many unfinished questions..."³⁸

In his book, Perestroika, Gorbachev writes, "It is imperative to more actively involve women in the management of the economy, in cultural development and public life."³⁹ A few paragraphs later in his book, Gorbachev writes:

... we failed to pay attention to women's specific rights and needs arising from their role as mother and homemaker, and their indispensable educational function as regards children. Engaged in scientific research, working on construction sites, in production, and in the services, women no longer have enough time to perform their everyday duties at home--housework, the upbringing of children and the creation of a good family atmosphere. We have discovered that many of our problems-- in children's and young people's behavior, in our morals, culture and in production--are partially caused by the weakening of family ties and slack attitude to family responsibilities. This is a paradoxical result of our sincere and politically justified desire to make women equal with men in everything. Now, in the course of perestroika, we have begun to overcome this shortcoming. That is why we are now holding heated debates... about the question of what we should do to make it possible for women to return to their purely womanly mission.⁴⁰

Gorbachev has also recommended the removal of women from strenuous jobs that are hazardous to their health. Other Soviet female leaders have echoed this cry. Deputy I. A. Yegorova, in a speech before the People's Congress, argued for women to be removed from night shifts and hazardous jobs.⁴¹ Similarly, USSR Deputy Culture Minister Nina Selkova stated that "Doctors draw a direct link between working conditions and physical loads with the increase in women's illnesses and the pathology of pregnancy and births."⁴²

Thus, there appears to be a legitimate concern for the welfare and health of Soviet women and family. However, at the same time, implementation of measures directed toward returning women to their purely womanly mission could lead to discriminatory practices causing them to lose ground that they won with the revolution. For example, women could be excluded from certain occupations. The dichotomy of the woman as both the producer and reproducer is difficult for the Soviets to resolve. Whereas in the United States the goal is to give women a choice, it seems in the Soviet Union that the current trend is more of an either/or philosophy-toward women as the reproducer, their biological obligation. This approach also has the potential to offer a solution to the Soviet Union's concern that the Russian birthrate

is decreasing and the Central Asian rate is increasing. Russian women do not have time to take care of large families. In fact, it is estimated that Soviet women only spend 16 to 17 minutes a day on childrearing.⁴³

Despite this somewhat contradictory rhetoric from Gorbachev on where the Soviet women should go, there is hope for women--a bright star. Gorbachev has an equal and influential partner--Raisa Maximovna. There are those who believe that Raisa has considerable influence with Gorbachev and that she is causing him to pay attention to women's concerns. Raisa is educated, successful and pretty.⁴⁴ She is considered his full partner, his intellectual peer.⁴⁵ However, women in the Soviet Union do not like her; many are jealous of her because Raisa gets to do things and has nice things that they do not have.⁴⁶ This seems tied to the psychology of envy in the Soviet Union--they cannot stand anybody else being better off than they are. If someone has a new car, their tendency is to hope it gets smashed rather than the American policy of keeping up with the Joneses. The American philosophy is if Jones gets a new car, I am going to work harder so I can afford a new car.⁴⁷ Hopefully, the Soviet women will put this jealousy aside, and look to Raisa for a better future. In a National Public Radio broadcast in February 1991, a Soviet

analyst claimed that "it was Raisa who originated glasnost, and that Raisa was more ambitious than Gorbachev when they lived in the boonies."⁴⁸

This dichotomy of the Soviet woman seems prevalent in how they see themselves and in how others see them. It is as if Soviet women almost have two personalities, somewhat schizophrenic: domineering but also subservient to men.⁴⁹ They have been characterized as capable and strong as well as warm and nurturing.⁵⁰ This perhaps is explained by their tragic history. They have seen millions of their husbands and sons killed through numerous wars. Soviet women have evolved into women with a "tough fiber, but also with a marvelous grace."⁵¹

When a Soviet analyst was asked how she would stereotype Soviet women, she stated: "Overworked, unhappy with their lives--standing in lines, taking care of the kids, alcoholism among men, and the general attitude of Soviet men toward women is not enlightened." She added that the Soviet Union just got beauty pageants two years ago and they love them. The women think they are great. In the United States, many American women think beauty pageants are an exploitation of women. Soviet women are behind us. They are interested in trying to be more feminine.⁵² This thinking is illuminated by Francine du Plessix Gray when a 34-year-old film director asked: "Did we win anything from our

emancipation?" Her answer is "I rather think we lost the most important thing, happiness. We would all be happier in this country if wives were calmer, more peaceful and relaxed."⁵³ A female Soviet politician also confirms this trend. Maia Leosk, a Soviet women's rights advocate, worries about the declining birth rate. Her desire for women is that they had enough inner beauty for their professional life and public activities, and still preserve femininity and tenderness for their family life.⁵⁴

Some writers and analysts of Soviet women's affairs ask if there will be a women's movement in the Soviet Union. Dr. Carol Nechemias, an American female professor of Soviet women studies, concludes that there is a foundation for a women's movement. She adds that the leadership is primarily from the intelligentsia. Dr. Nechemias emphasizes that the road ahead will not be easy. There are those who profess women have too much equality and should return to their womanly duties and there are those who believe women never in reality achieved equality and that equality is still a goal.⁵⁵ However, there are several obstacles or road blocks. For example, some believe that liberals and intellectuals are not a reliable social base group to rely on in politics.⁵⁶

In order to have an effective women's movement more involvement from all classes of women will be required. The fact

that there are so many different ethnic and religious groups in the Soviet Union will make it even more difficult. Unification will be harder with so many various beliefs, mores and cultural backgrounds. It is difficult for some women to think of such social changes when they are more concerned about what food will be available or how long they are going to have to wait in line to purchase life's necessities.

When a Soviet professor of philosophy, recently visiting the United States, was asked if Soviet women were equal from an ideological and practical point of view, he stated that women are equal politically and socially. The professor added that this was not one of the main problems of USSR society. The primary problem, he stated, was the condition of women's labor--the women work in heavy, physical work. He elaborated: it almost "makes them change to men." The professor concluded that there are no special obstacles for women, and that the problem is satisfactory in his (Soviet Union) country.⁵⁷

Where are Soviet women going? Are Soviet women truly equal? Are things as they appear or are they as the Soviet Union would like us to believe? Using our American lenses we may think that Soviet women are going backwards--that they are losing the equality that they did have. But in their eyes, minds and hearts, they may not see, think, or feel the same way. Our culture and

experiences have not evolved in the same manner and under the same circumstances as the Soviet Union. We have not lived through war, death, destruction, totalitarian rule and paranoia as they have. Women in the United States have not seen millions of men--husbands and sons killed. We see things differently. A simple women's thing, such as wearing slacks, is not seen in the Soviet Union among the older generation. The influence of the West has reached the younger generation, though, since many wear slacks, and even jeans. It seems that some of our paths have crossed. Soviet women don't want to work in some jobs that they believe are unfeminine or hazardous. On the other hand, American women are fighting to have the opportunity to work in some of these same jobs. Soviet women are looking for enforced protection. The perception of Soviet equality may be just a myth, and glasnost has opened Soviet women's eyes to other societies. It will be difficult, if not impossible, for Soviet women to go backwards.

CURRENT ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE SOVIET ARMED FORCES

The best summary of the current role of women in the Soviet armed forces is analogous to the amount of information available about the subject--minimal and limited. In fact, several sources contacted recommended that I change my subject since there was not very much available information. There are some books and articles on the subject; a few published in the mid 1970s; most in

the 1980s; and one even in 1990. However, most of these references devote only a paragraph or two about the current role of women in the Soviet military.

In an effort to try to obtain additional information, and possibly more current statistics, I contacted three US government intelligence agencies. None had current information available on the subject. The agencies stated that the role was so minimal that they did not track women in the Soviet military.⁵⁸ Ellen Jones, a Soviet analyst with the Defense Intelligence Agency and author of Red Army and Society, which was published in 1985, did devote a couple pages to women in her book. In January 1991, she stated that it was included in her book because at the time it appeared that there was a slight increase in the recruitment of women in the Soviet military in the 1980s. However, the role has remained minimal and neither she nor anyone in her agency has tracked this subject since her book was published in 1985.⁵⁹ The Central Intelligence Agency tracks women in the Soviet Union as a societal issue, but women in the military is not tracked.⁶⁰

Since contact with US intelligence agencies was not very fruitful, I decided to contact organizations which research women's issues, specifically those concerning US/USSR relations. This was not productive either since none of their symposiums or conferences dealt with women in the military.⁶¹ Finally, I wrote

a letter to the Soviet embassy with a list of questions concerning the role of women in the Soviet military. They were able to answer some of my questions.⁶²

As a preamble to this subject, a quote from the current leadership of the Soviet Union seems appropriate. In addressing the special all-union party conference held in the summer of 1988, Gorbachev stated: "... we have proclaimed equality of rights for women and men, ensured equal access to almost all occupations, established identical pay for equal work, and guaranteed other women's rights."⁶³ What is key in this statement by Gorbachev is the ALMOST in "almost all occupations" because there certainly has not been equal access to the Soviet armed forces.

Based upon a review of the literature, the overall number of personnel in the Soviet armed forces varies depending upon the source, from 4.2 million to 5.1 million. The Soviets claim they have 3.7 million.⁶⁴ Similarly, the number of women varies depending on the source, with all sources stating that the exact number is unknown, and the majority reporting that the number is around 10,000. The lowest figure mentioned is "fewer than 10,000 women,"⁶⁵ while the highest strength lists no more than 30,000 women.⁶⁶ Based upon information from the Soviet embassy in February 1991, the number is more like 40,000 women.⁶⁷ These estimates reflect a drop from a wartime strength of approximately

one million women in uniform, but this figure is an increase over other sources. This makes the current percentage of women in the Soviet military equal to less than one percent, which compares to about 8.5 percent women in the US military⁶⁸ and 4 percent in the British armed forces.⁶⁹

Despite their extensive role in World War II, all sources reviewed noted the minimal role of women in the current Soviet military. Their role is limited primarily to traditional, support type positions. They generally work in the following areas: clerical, communications, administration, repair technicians, health and medical, and intelligence.⁷⁰ The Soviet embassy in February 1991 reported that women primarily held positions in justice, communications, nursing and air defense.⁷¹ Women are assigned to noncombatant positions,⁷² and are forbidden to serve on combat ships and planes.⁷³ Ellen Jones, in her book, states that this "virtual exclusion from most military roles contrasts sharply, both with Communist ideals of equality and with the wide female participation in most civilian fields."⁷⁴

In theory, women can hold any rank in the armed forces. However, in reality, since the number and types of positions available to women is restricted, their potential for career advancement is limited. The highest rank currently held today is colonel; there are no generals.⁷⁵ In the Soviet military, the

position itself, rather than the individual's rank, determines the rank the occupant will hold. This is similar to the US federal civil service system. Thus, women are afforded fewer promotion opportunities.⁷⁶

Obviously, women are not subject to conscription, at least, during peacetime. Interesting though, the Law of Universal Military Service of 1967 does specify the drafting of women in wartime. As a practical matter, the Soviets have implemented several programs and processes to ensure women are prepared in case mobilization is necessary. These include mandatory involvement in military youth programs, draftboard registration of those women with special skills required by the military, inclusion of former active servicewomen in reserve status until age 40, and reserve status for those who complete reserve officer training at the university level.⁷⁷

Women serve as enlisted personnel, warrant officers, and officers. Their selection is conducted by the military commissariat system based on quotas and job specialties determined by the military district headquarters. Women are enlisted under article 16 of the 1967 military service law. This provision reads that women aged 19 through 40 with medical and other specialized training can be registered in military records in peacetime, enlisted for training periods, or admitted as volunteers for

active duty. The enlistment requirements for women are: physically fit, age 19 to 40, unmarried, childless, and have at least eight years of schooling. Women can volunteer for periods of two, four, and six years.⁷⁸

Women up to age 30, who have a higher or specialized secondary education and possess a specialty for which women are recruited, may volunteer as warrant officers. They can stay on active duty until age 40; having an initial enlistment requirement of five years with minimum reenlistment periods of three years. The majority of women in today's Soviet military are warrant officers.⁷⁹

Since women are currently not authorized to attend any of the Soviet Union's officer commissioning schools, their opportunities in the officer corps are extremely limited. Most female officers either serve as medical officers or as engineers in communications specialties.⁸⁰ Officers can stay on active duty until age 50. Only two percent of the women in the Soviet military today are officers.⁸¹ This is a very low percentage, especially when compared to the United States military where about 15 percent of the women are officers, and where about the same percentage applies to US military men overall.⁸²

All military women are integrated into the armed forces; there is not a separate organization for women similar to the British system or the previous US system. Since all is not equal for men and women in the Soviet military, this system has further limited the opportunities for women because they have not had the same command experience as military women in other countries such as Great Britain and the United States.⁸³ Training of women is not as extreme or harsh as for men. Women attend separate classes in politics, physical training, and armed forces regulations.⁸⁴

As far as benefits are concerned, women are treated equal to men. Women receive the same pay, allowances and pensions as their male counterparts. On the other hand, although women are subject to disciplinary regulations, discipline for women is more lenient and different than for men in the military. For example, women are not subject to arrest, confinement, restriction to the unit area, or assignment to extra duties. Instead, they can receive a reprimand or admonition, and be deprived of insignia, reduced in military rank, or transferred. This special treatment probably relates to the belief that women are not equal to men, and must be pampered and shielded from harsh treatment.⁸⁵

Women are housed separately from men. Female officers and warrant officers enjoy the same housing benefits as their men counterparts. Many women live at home in their garrison area.

Those women married to servicemen are guaranteed postings with their husbands.⁸⁶

There was a positive change for Soviet women in 1981 when a resolution was approved concerning pregnant servicewomen. Previously, pregnant women were mandatorily discharged into the reserves. Now, there are several options: they can request early discharge; their command may decide to discharge them if the pregnancy interferes substantially with their duties; or they may remain on active duty and receive the same paid leave and maternity benefit package as civilian employees. It should be noted that the Soviet maternity benefit package is considerably better; that is, more liberal, than maternity benefits in the United States.⁸⁷

Despite this one, positive action for women in the Soviet military, opportunities for women continue to be extremely limited. In an article about women in the Soviet military published in 1982, the authors state that "opportunities for entering the more prestigious professions (military, agriculture, industry) in the Soviet Union are limited by discriminatory admissions policies in the higher schools of learning." The article further states that women are not admitted to the military academies.⁸⁸ Based upon information provided by military

personnel from the Soviet embassy in February 1991, this exclusion still exists.⁸⁹

Ellen Jones has acknowledged the significant and detrimental societal implications of excluding women, over one-half of the Soviet Union's citizens, from the peacetime military. She believes that this exclusion of women has affected their access to the political system since security and the armed forces play such a critical role in Soviet policy.⁹⁰

At this point in time, the current role of women in the Soviet military can be summarized by recent comments from two male military officers, one in the United States military and one in the Soviet military. The US officer stated that women in the Soviet military have no positions of authority and the Soviets say they will not have positions of authority.⁹¹ The Soviet officer stated that the special service for women in the Soviet military is only in wartime.⁹²

Thus, in conclusion, it appears that the current role of women in the Soviet military is so limited that it has little, if any, impact on the current force.

THE FUTURE OF WOMEN IN THE SOVIET ARMED FORCES

As with the Soviet Union in general, it is difficult to predict what the future will hold because of Soviet domestic turmoil. The unexpected and the uncertain seem to be the norm. Today's predictions could very well change tomorrow. Based on past experiences, one could safely conclude that the future role of women in the Soviet armed forces will be minimal and limited, unless war occurs. Then, and only then, would women's role increase. Due to either real or perceived sweeping changes in the Soviet Union today given glasnost and perestroika, there are other factors that should be considered. These include the changing attitude of women and the general population toward the military, the possibility of a volunteer force, the downsizing of the military, and the complex and contradictory views of and toward Soviet women. Finally, in addition to these factors, the prediction must answer both sides of the question: what role do women want to have in the Soviet military and what role do the Soviets want women to have?

Before examining the future of women in the Soviet military, some facts about women in the military of other countries seem appropriate. While both the United States and the USSR face similar demographic trends, the USSR has continued to rely on conscription, which provides a continuous and guaranteed source of

soldiers. The United States, on the other hand, elected to move to a volunteer force. This decision, coupled with the enhanced equality of women in general in the United States, expanded female's participation in the US military.⁹³ The percentage of women in the US military increased dramatically, from 1.6 percent in 1973 (when the draft ended) to 8.5 percent in 1989. There are over 229,000 women on active duty in the military services of the United States Department of Defense.⁹⁴

According to Facts About Women in the Military 1980-1990, many other countries, facing similar trends in declining male population, have increased the numbers and opportunities for women in the military. Countries mentioned in the article included Britain, Canada, Denmark, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Greece, The Netherlands, Turkey, Israel and Japan. There was no mention of the Soviet Union. Based upon a January 1991 query to the Women's Research and Education Institute, it was stated that they had no information on women in the Soviet military.⁹⁵

Information on the future use of women in the Soviet military may be lacking, but there is evidence that women are taking an active role in opposing the military. Women have recently become very vocal against the military and conscription.⁹⁶ It appears that many Soviet women have a negative view toward the military. Their main view is as "moms" of soldiers rather than as soldiers

themselves. In January 1990, Russian women were incensed and protested when MVD militia cadets were to be sent into Baku, Azerbaijan. They were upset because the boys were just cadets and also because they sent them to control a hot, ethnic area where there had been a lot of bloodshed. Vadim Bakatan, former head of the Ministry of Interior, rescinded the order. This is said to be the first response to women's demands, especially at such a high level.⁹⁷

Similarly, in late 1990, an All Union Form of Soldiers' Mothers was established. These women were very vocal about limiting conscription and also voiced concerns about Russians serving in areas of ethnic conflict. They alleged that 15,000 soldiers died between 1986-1990 due to accidents, suicide and hazing. The group asked the military prosecutor to investigate the abuses within the armed forces, especially hazing. The women stated that if they did not get a response, they would disrupt the October call up.

In November 1990 women threatened to protest on 7 November (October Revolution anniversary). However, they did not, and instead, met with Gorbachev who promised to investigate military hazing. He also pledged his support to improve benefits for service members.

In fall 1990, a decree on the protection of servicemen rights was passed. Rasbutin, who is on the Presidential Council, said the January 1990 incident and the actions of women in September 1990 were influential in convincing Gorbachev to sign the service benefit decree.⁹⁸

As recent as January 1991, women in Latvia protested about conscription laws. They held a march because they did not want soldiers fighting outside of their republics to contain ethnic unrest. Similar feelings have been vocalized by the women in Lithuania. In fact, some female Soviet analysts believe that Soviet women could be mobilized, drawn into a national movement and possibly form separate organizations to pursue particular national goals, such as changing Soviet military service policy.⁹⁹

As stated in the introductory paragraph of this section, history alone is not necessarily an adequate predictor of the future due to "new thinking" brought about by Mikhail Gorbachev. The Soviet Union's military institution is in a transition era, specifically, in the areas of technology, ethnically and differences between the generations.¹⁰⁰ Until recently the USSR armed forces had a respectable position in Soviet society, and indeed, were the envy of many.¹⁰¹ Gorbachev's reforms are having an affect on the military's elite position in Soviet society, and

could drastically change the makeup of the Soviet military and its personnel. The reductions in military spending will result in manpower reductions, a "meaner but leaner" force, an emphasis on training, and the possibility of a volunteer force.¹⁰²

The Soviet military is not just a fighting organization; it is an institution representing the Soviet population. It is an important political and socializing mechanism.¹⁰³ A Sovietologist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology states that "all the fractures and multiple personalities of the Soviet Union play out in the army." Since the Soviet military is based upon conscription, it is a mirror or reflection of the nation and Soviet society.¹⁰⁴ Conscription in the Soviet military is a way to bring together--to integrate--the many nationalities and ethnic groups of the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁵ Openly and consciously omitted from this military representation of society are women.

Ellen Jones, in her book, Red Army and Society, explains the exclusion of women as necessary for the socialization process of men. The Soviet adolescent male is primarily nurtured in a world dominated by females. The school system is dominated by women, and high school girls are active in school leadership.¹⁰⁶ This was also reiterated by Francine du Plessix Gray. During her visits to Soviet schools she saw that female teachers and little girls were

the dominant figures; males seemed timid and dominated by women.¹⁰⁷ Jones proposes that the inclusion of women on a large scale in the Soviet armed forces would perhaps have a negative affect on the socialization process of the Soviet males--affecting the male role model and the resultant masculinity of Soviet men.¹⁰⁸

Another similar problem with increasing the use of women in the Soviet military is proposed in a 1982 article. Mary O'Brien and LTC Chris Jefferies state that an increase in women would have an adverse affect on the ethnic problems the Soviet Union already faces. There would be a tendency to favor Russian women since they have the technical and educational background desired. However, recruiting from only one ethnic group would create political problems. In addition, by employing Russian women in the military, this could negatively affect the Russian birth rate, and add to the already disparate birth rates between Russians and non-Russians.¹⁰⁹

Under glasnost and perestroika, the long respected military profession is no longer seen in the same light. In a December 1990 article in The Washington Post, entitled "Coming Apart at the Seams: The Once Proud Soviet Army Has Fallen on Hard Times," a story is told of the Chinstagov Regiment which was proudly used in the past to drive out foreigners from Soviet soil; this regiment

is now being used to bake bread and dig potatoes. In this same article, a 42-year-old lieutenant colonel states that "when they used to walk down the street wearing their uniforms, they were viewed with respect; now, they are viewed almost as beggars."¹¹⁰ When recently asked about the changing image of Soviet society toward the military, a Soviet colonel stated that twenty years ago when he was a lieutenant and went into a restaurant, people looked at him as a remarkable person. Now, Soviet people see or think of the uselessness of the military. When this same colonel was asked if he thought the image would improve in the future, he said he did not believe so.¹¹¹

The question then arises why would women want to even be part of such an organization? This change in view of the military institution has created some problems. A 1990 book on the reform of Soviet military doctrine states that "while criticism of the military hails from all corners of Soviet society, the younger generation is singularly estranged from, even repulsed by, the armed forces."¹¹² As a result, young boys of conscription age are not showing up for the draft. As of January 1991, there was a twenty percent draft shortfall.¹¹³ If the draft is not strictly enforced, the potential to tap women in certain disciplines could be a possibility.

Another area that could have an impact on the role of women in the Soviet military is the possibility of a volunteer force. Although a volunteer force is freely discussed by the Soviet military, the actual implementation seems unlikely. In a 1990 book on Gorbachev and his generals, Patrick Cronin states that there are too many obstacles that would have to be overcome, the least of which is that nearly all Soviet military leaders are against ending conscription.¹¹⁴ Even if the unlikely would occur and the Soviet military would go to an all volunteer force, it is probable that this would have no effect on the role of women. Soviet women have been quite vocal in opposing the military. Furthermore, with an all volunteer force the pay would not be that good because the Soviet Union cannot afford to continue to devote a large portion of its economy to defense. Therefore, there would not be an incentive for women to volunteer.

In the United States, many women joined the military because of the chances for advancement and education. The Soviet military, however, has nothing to offer. On the other hand, some Soviet analysts believe that the role of women may change if the military converts to a volunteer basis since fewer men want to stay in the armed forces. A survey of current military personnel revealed that they would not stay in if they could leave.¹¹⁵

Still another area affecting the military in the future is the proposed, and in some cases, already initiated downsizing of the Soviet armed forces. This consists of reducing military personnel by 500,000 men, approximately 400,000 conscripts and 100,000 officers.¹¹⁶ A 1982 article about women and the Soviet military discussed the potential need for women due to declining birthrates.¹¹⁷ The article stated, however, that a decision to increase the use of women was unlikely since women were still needed in the civilian industrial sector and women obviously were needed to increase the birthrates. Since the Soviet military is reducing by a half million men, the declining availability of men of conscription age is a mute point. In fact, the Soviet Union will be searching for ways to employ these men in the industrial sector or the economy.

In addition to the overall changes in the military and the effect that these changes may have on the future role of women in the Soviet armed forces, the overall view of women about women and Soviet society's view toward women will have an impact on females in the military service. As stated previously, there appear to be several reasons why there will not be an increase in the role of women in the military. There is a need and desire for women to have more babies, for them to return to their womanly mission. Women are required in the civilian labor force. Women want to be more feminine. Women are already overburdened and too tired to

"fight" for increased roles. They will not be equal until the standard of living improves in the Soviet Union. Women are not pro-military. In fact, they have demonstrated against conscription and hazing. Women are against war. A statement by a professor of linguistics at Leningrad University highlights how women feel about the military and war: "This business of war is a man's game. A woman would never think of planning or executing such a thing."¹¹⁸ For all of these perceptions and feelings about and toward women, it seems unlikely that women as a group will have a desire to increase their role in the Soviet military.

The other half of the equation is how the military feel about an increased participation of women in the military. Overall, the military do not want them unless they believe the country is threatened or there is a need for them. Since war does not seem imminent or probable, the remaining possibility would be if the military perceive a need. There are those who believe that because of the problem the military has been having attracting personnel, they may have to use women even more.¹¹⁹ A 1990 book, titled Gorbachev and His Generals: The Reform of Soviet Military Doctrine, discusses the increased interest in better training in the military schools. The book goes so far as to state that women may be admitted to raise academic standards.¹²⁰ A Soviet colonel who has asked for a complete transformation of the higher military education to conform to the "new thinking",

states:

that there is even merit in taking up the problem of possible admission of women to a number of academies and officers' schools. Why cannot our military VUZ's train women to become specialists in communications, administrative and support activities, financial service, and military law, thus making it possible to enhance the process of selecting men for admission to academies and officers' schools by attracting the most talented and worthy candidates?¹²¹

Therefore, it appears that the military see an increased potential need for women in the future. They recognize women's educational accomplishments, but only in the regard to increase the overall standard for men. It is almost similar to the "Battalions of Death" in World War I, where women were used to shame male deserters. Even the "new thinking" colonel only sees women in traditional, support roles--not as equals.

The feeling of the military toward women can be summarized in a true story told by a US male Army officer who lectured at the United States Army War College in November 1990. The lecturer relayed an incident that occurred during one of his arms control verification visits to the Soviet Union. During this particular visit, there were US female soldiers with him. The Soviet officer questioned the US officer as to why the US resorted to using women in such positions. The US colonel replied by highlighting the significant accomplishments of women and that the United States

has finally recognized the important role of women and has placed them in roles of authority. The Soviet officer replied that if such a thing happened in his country he would resign.¹²²

In conclusion, despite all the changes going on in the Soviet Union, it seems unlikely that the role of women in the Soviet military will increase, regardless if conscription continues or if the military goes to an all-volunteer force. Women's eyes have been opened, and they are now more aware of what is happening in the United States and other countries, but it is doubtful that they have a desire to increase their role in the Soviet armed forces. The opportunities in the United States military are just not available in the Soviet Union. The Soviets will continue to maintain their basically all-male military, backed up with a small cadre of women in special areas. They may, however, be required to increase this cadre by a minimal amount due to the changes taking place. One thing is certain, without doubt, that if the military needs women, they will get them. And, it goes without saying, that if the Soviet Union is threatened, the military will use women and will put them in every type of position required. Similarly, the women will willingly serve and will do what is necessary to protect their Motherland.

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